

by Ben Ikenson

# Ranching for Longhorns *and* Wildlife



**Attwater's greater prairie chicken**  
*USFWS photo*

Before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico, the San Bernard River, a ribbon of water and hardwood trees in the gulf coast prairie of southeastern Texas, passes through the ranch of John and Taunia Elick. Their ranch is home not only to Texas Longhorn cattle but also a wide variety of wildlife, including bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), which use the tall cottonwoods lining the river for their winter roost. It's no wonder that John named their 1,800-acre (730-hectare) spread the Eagle Roost Ranch.

If ranches were always named for the birds that populate them, there once was a time the Elick's place could have been called the Attwater's Prairie Chicken Ranch. A grouse species that thrived on the land before Elick's time, Attwater's greater prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido attwateri*), has become North America's most endangered bird. Elick and fellow ranchers in the area have joined an effort to restore this bird, a lost element of the important Gulf Coast prairie ecosystem.

"I want to do something for wildlife," said Elick. "I want to help create and maintain habitat for wildlife because I believe that what is good for the ecology of the land is good for me and my ranch."

Elick is one of eight landowners working to restore a total of over 17,800 acres (7,200 ha) of Texas coastal prairie habitat as part of the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative. The initiative is jointly sponsored by the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), the Sam Houston Resource Conservation and Development Board, and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts. It allows landowners to receive

cost-share incentives for voluntary prairie habitat conservation practices such as brush control, modifications in grazing management, and prescribed burning. These practices are intended to benefit landowners by improving the health of their range land while at the same time enhancing wildlife habitat.

Landowners can also sign a "Safe Harbor" agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service. These agreements essentially relieve landowners of liability under the Endangered Species Act if management practices attract endangered species. In addition to the Attwater's prairie chicken, other endangered species covered under the Safe Harbor provisions include the Houston toad (*Bufo houstonensis*) and a plant, the Texas prairie dawn-flower (*Hymenoxys texana*).

Before Elick was involved in the Safe Harbor program, he was concerned that the Federal government would infringe on his property rights if it was discovered that his property attracted such endangered species as the prairie chicken and bald eagle. But after hearing about the Safe Harbor agreements, Elick approached program representatives within the Service and the local Resource Conservation and Development Board.

"Basically," said Elick, "I learned that the Safe Harbor was designed to protect the ranch owner's property rights on his land, and yet provide the government special use ranchland for endangered species habitat without the price tag of acquiring the land. Both the government and private landowner benefit without any negative drawbacks to either party."

"It's a win-win situation for everyone involved," said Terry Rossignol, manager of Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR. "The rancher improves his habitat for his cattle operation and the Attwater's prairie chicken benefits from the improved habitat as well."

If participating landowners carry out the agreed upon cost-shared habitat improvements, they may develop, farm, or ranch without fear of being stopped. They are required only to notify the Service and give it an opportunity to relocate any endangered species expected to be adversely affected by changes in land management.

"This program has mushroomed in popularity and, because Texas is more than 97 percent privately owned, it now holds the key to successful recovery of the Attwater's prairie chicken," said Rossignol. "Without the help of private landowners, the bird is doomed to extinction."

Since 1996, releases of captive-reared prairie chickens have been conducted at the refuge and Galveston Bay Coastal Prairie Preserve. However, these release sites can support only a limited number of birds. Success of the recovery and captive propagation/release program really depends on the cooperative efforts of private landowners.

Recent landowner participation may just prove that cattle grazing and endangered species recovery can go hand in hand. Before long, things might start looking brighter for the bird thanks to people like John Elick. In his own words, he uses the "holistic approach to managing the ranch for cattle grazing, wildlife habitat, and recreational enjoyment of the land." His cattle roundups, chuckwagon trail rides, and quail hunts are extremely popular with his friends who want to experience the "early Texas landscape and lifestyle."

At sunset on his ranch, Elick often sits atop a horse on the forested banks of the San Bernard, letting several of his Texas Longhorns take a drink from the river. Quail call to each other in the brush. A bald eagle glides by en route



*John Elick at his Eagle Roost Ranch*  
USFWS photo

to its evening roost on the branch of a cottonwood tree. Some might say it doesn't get any better than this. But Elick believes it can. With the help of the new partnership program, he hopes to welcome home the Attwater's prairie chicken—a piece of nature and of the past that has been missing from his ranch for too long.

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### **History of the Eagle Roost Ranch**

**Legend holds that divisions of Santa Ana's Mexican army crossed the San Bernard River on the ranch in 1836 in pursuit of Sam Houston's army. The first owner of the ranch, Henry Freisin, was awarded the ranch by the Republic of Texas for his service in the Battle of San Jacinto, when Santa Ana's army was defeated. In later years, historically famous cattle barons of the 1880's—Shanghai Pierce and Robert Stafford—gathered cattle ranging over the area during the Chisholm Trail drive days. Local tradition contends that "Parker's Hole" on the San Bernard river is the place where horse rustlers were hanged from the cottonwood trees. The ranch is still the original tract patented to Henry Freisen in 1836 and has been ranched continuously ever since that time.**